

**TESTIMONY FOR THE APPROPRIATIONS COMMITTEE
FEBRUARY 22, 2012**

Eric Arzubi, M.D.

**Opposing
H.B. No. 5014**

**AN ACT MAKING ADJUSTMENTS TO STATE EXPENDITURES AND REVENUES FOR THE FISCAL
YEAR ENDING JUNE 30, 2013
(DPH)**

Dear Senator Harp, Representative Walker, and members of the Appropriations Committee. My name is Dr. Eric Arzubi and I am here as the Co-Chair of the Children's Committee of the Keep the Promise Coalition, or KTP Kids, Connecticut's largest organization of stakeholders in child mental health. I am also a Fellow in Child and Adolescent Psychiatry at the Yale Child Study Center, and I serve on the Schools Committee of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry.

I want to thank the legislature for their ongoing commitment to the public health of our children over the years by continuing to support school-based health centers. These centers provide natural medical homes for our children that have demonstrated benefits for their health and education.

A decrease in funding represents a step backwards for the public health of our youth; any cut in funding for school-based health centers will affect thousands of our most vulnerable children by eliminating much-needed primary care and mental health services.

I've been involved in a unique collaboration with Hamden Public Schools to provide enhanced student and family supports at the Church Street Elementary School. The school serves nearly 500 students, and more than 80% of them qualify for free school lunches. Howard Hornreich, the School's passionate principal, has been working day and night to boost academic and developmental outcomes for his students. He attends every PTA meeting, and he has assembled a strong group of leaders to form the School's Governance Council.

As part of our plan to help these kids, we were looking to open a school-based health center at the Church Street School, helping the community's families to access scarce medical and mental health resources. In fact, the Hamden Board of Education recently gave us the green light to move ahead on the planned opening of the school-based health center.

Then, we hit a wall. First, there is no formal process in Connecticut to access funds from the Department of Public Health to open a school-based health center. It literally takes the legislature passing a new law to secure the seed money. Secondly, in January, Governor Malloy announced more than \$500,000 in rescissions for the DPH school-based health center budget, and he's proposing another \$400,000 in cuts for 2013. That amounts to nearly \$1,000,000, or 10%, of cuts in direct pediatric and mental health services for children. These are not funds that pay for supplies, materials, or overhead costs. They fund direct services for children.

School-based health centers provide critical services regardless of the student's ability to pay, and in a location that meets students where they spend most of their waking hours: at school. Because of their location, the clinicians at school-based health centers are first-hand witnesses to factors that impact student health and academic achievement — including bullying, school violence, depression, stress, and poor eating habits — some of which health providers outside a school setting may miss. Clinicians at school-based health centers have the time and the resources to address the many challenges that students may bring with them to the classroom.

Think of school-based health centers as one of our most powerful weapons in our fight to shrink Connecticut's troubling academic achievement gap. A child with poorly controlled diabetes and another with untreated anxiety disorder are less likely to succeed in school than children who are fortunate enough to be healthy. Healthy children just plain learn better.

Distraught over the threatened 10% cuts in funding for school-based health centers, I reached out to the American Public Health Association for a statement to share with you all this evening. I did this because the APHA recently announced a new initiative to promote the expansion of school-based health centers in the U.S. The director of their school programs wrote:

"School-based health centers are a vital service for all communities providing access to comprehensive medical care, mental health services, preventive care, social services, and youth development. They ease the burden of access on working parents. And for our most vulnerable students, decrease the likelihood of truancy and increase the likelihood that they will stay in school."

School-based health centers allow us to leverage scarce health care resources, especially in our quest to tackle Connecticut's child mental health crisis. There are nearly 600,000 K-12 students in our state, with about 120,000 struggling with diagnosable, treatable emotional-behavioral problems. Unfortunately, only 20% of those children can access the care they need and deserve, leaving about 90,000 to 100,000 school-aged children in our state with unmet mental health care needs.

Of the 20,000 to 30,000 children who do access mental health services, about 75% of them do so in a school setting. In other words, our public schools have become the de facto child mental health care system. Research shows that children and families who access mental health care services in schools are less likely to experience stigma, more likely to engage in services, and students are more likely to engage in the classroom. Additionally, the presence of school-based health centers has been shown to improve overall school climate.

On January 25, KTP Kids organized Connecticut's First School Mental Health Summit, which was attended by the Commissioners of DCF and SDE, among about 170 stakeholders in school mental health. The overwhelming positive response to this Summit is a testament to the importance of investing to enhance school-based health services. We hope to continue working with the leadership at DPH, SDE, and DCF to form an interagency task force on school mental health to find innovative ways to deliver and sustain services to children in schools.

Please help me to open a school-based health center at the Church Street Elementary School in Hamden, CT. Help me to provide these 500 students with a natural medical home. Our state's network of school-based health centers represents a public health "sweet spot" for children, one that deserves continued investment and expansion.